

WEEK 1: What is Prayer?



In this first week of our prayer journey, the key task is to emphasise prayer as a vital and growing relationship with God rather than some dry and dusty ritual or a burden imposed upon us.

The one takeaway we want people to go away with, above anything else, is that prayer is a living relationship with a God who can be known and wants to grow into a deep, abiding and loving relationship with us.



Key Reading: Luke 11.5-13 Jesus' teaching on prayer in the Sermon on the Mount.

Then Jesus said to them, "Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.' And suppose the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity. He will surely get up and give you as much as you need.

"So I say to you: Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

"Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or will he give him a scorpion if he asks for an egg? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him."

Supporting Readings:

If you want to add a second bible reading to your service, then you could use Philippians 4.4-7 (Paul's teaching to the church at Philippi) or 2 Chronicles 7.11-16 (an Old Testament perspective on transformative prayer)

You are welcome to work with either the supporting readings (or other biblical texts on prayer), but we will focus on the key passage from Luke's Gospel for these resources.



Preparing a sermon and worship on prayer with the reading from the Parable of The Friend at Midnight offers the opportunity to explore the nature of prayer and its practical impact on our lives.

Our text, Luke 11:5-13, follows directly from Jesus' teaching of the Lord's Prayer and provides further instruction on approaching God in prayer.

Note: We will look at the Lord's Prayer itself in the coming weeks, so you do not need to cover those verses in this week's preaching.

Key Themes and Lessons

- **Persistence in Prayer:** The parable of the friend at midnight illustrates the importance of being persistent and bold in our prayers—not giving up even when it doesn't seem like God is listening.
- **God's Fatherly Nature:** The passage contrasts the reluctant friend with God, a loving parent eager to give good gifts to His children. It encourages believers to approach God confidently, knowing He is more willing to help than a human friend often is.
- **Prayer as Relationship:** The passage emphasises that prayer is not just about asking for things but is a means of developing a deeper relationship with God. It's about approaching God with our needs, trusting in His goodness, and aligning our desires with His will.

Application

- **Approach with Boldness:** Jesus teaches that we should come to God with the boldness of a friend who can ask for help at any time.
- **Seeking God's Will:** Our prayers should be motivated by a desire to see God's name honoured and the establishment of his kingdom (rule) in our lives, our community and the wider world. This reflects the priorities taught earlier in the chapter in the verses that we now call The Lord's Prayer.
- **Assurance of Answer:** The passage assures us that God hears our prayers and does respond, even if we do not ultimately get exactly what we ask for. Instead, God works in our lives in ways that, although not always obvious, ultimately benefit us in our spiritual journey.

This passage powerfully reminds us of the nature of prayer in the Christian life. It's not just a ritual or a duty but a dynamic interaction with a loving God who invites us to communicate with Him openly and persistently.

Remember - this is week one of a series. We aren't here to answer every question about prayer. We'll tackle some of those other questions in the weeks to come!



"Prayer is simply a conversation between you and God." *Billy Graham*

"Prayer is the link that connects us with God." *A.B. Simpson*

"I pray—not wish—because I have God, not a genie." *Source Unknown*

"As it is the business of tailors to make clothes and cobblers to make shoes, so it is the business of Christians to pray." *Martin Luther.*

"God does nothing except in response to believing prayer." *John Wesley*

"Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul. It is daily admission of one's weakness." *Mahatma Gandhi*

"Prayer is nothing else than being on terms of friendship with God." *Teresa of Avila*

"And so I urge you: carry on an ongoing conversation with God about the daily stuff of life, a little like Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Do not worry about 'proper' praying; just talk to God." *Richard J. Foster.*

"True prayer is neither a mere mental exercise nor a vocal performance. It is far deeper than that. It is a spiritual transaction with the creator of Heaven and Earth." *Charles Spurgeon.*

"Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tyre?" *Corrie Ten Boom*



Tearfund commissioned the polling organisation ComRes to conduct detailed polling and research into Prayer in the UK in 2018. This revealed several interesting findings about prayer habits in the UK:

- **Prayer is more common than we might think:** Half of the adults in the UK (51%) reported praying, indicating that prayer is a more common practice than we might imagine.
- **Even non-religious people sometimes pray:** Even among those who do not consider themselves religious, one in five (20%) said they pray, suggesting that prayer transcends religious boundaries.

- **There are many reasons for praying.** The most common reasons include being in a crisis (55%), believing in God (39%), and believing that prayer makes a difference (32%). This shows that many people use prayer to cope with difficult times.
- **People pray about diverse topics:** When it comes to what people pray about, family (71%) was the top subject, followed by expressions of gratitude (42%), prayers for healing (40%), and friends (40%). Global issues like poverty or natural disasters were less common subjects, ranking seventh at 24%
- **People who pray tend to believe it is effective:** Those who pray strongly believe in its efficacy; 49% agree that God hears their prayers, and 39% believe that prayer can change the world.
- **Praying makes people feel better:** Praying has a positive emotional impact, with 40% of those who pray reporting feelings of reassurance or hope after praying.

These findings highlight prayer's continued importance and relevance in the lives of many individuals in the UK, regardless of their religious affiliation.

We might think prayer is fading in the UK as our society becomes increasingly secular and irreligious. But that doesn't seem to be the case—a 2022 survey by the UK polling organisation Savanta ComRes found that young people in the UK are more likely to pray than those over 55.

Specifically, 51% of 18 to 34-year-olds reported praying at least once a month, compared to 24% of those aged 55 and over.

It appears that a large cohort of younger people—most of whom never set foot inside a church—still turn to prayer in certain situations in life.



Here's a sermon outline for Luke 11:5-13, slanted towards the question, "What do we mean by prayer?" There are, of course, a variety of different approaches to the text—feel free to use your own; this is offered to anyone looking for a bit of inspiration.

Introduction

Introduce the concept of prayer as a multifaceted practice, not just "asking God for things" but more about a relationship with God. Whilst prayer is—at its heart—a simple exercise, it is also deep and mysterious as we encounter the Divine Creator.

There are quotes and other resources later in these resources—feel free to use one or more of those to help set the theme.

Note that those asking the question were not unbelievers but the disciples (11.1)—people who, on the face of it, ought to already know how to pray. Perhaps they had seen something about how Jesus prayed that challenged their assumptions about prayer.

This illustrates that even those who practice a religious faith do not always understand the meaning of the devotional life. It's OK to admit that we don't have all the answers, even if we've been part of the church for many years!

1. Persistence

Explain the parable of the friend at midnight, emphasising prayer as a persistent and consistent dialogue with God. Discuss how persistence in prayer reflects our trust in God's timing and wisdom.

2. Parenthood

Delve into the imagery of God as a Father, highlighting prayer as an intimate conversation with a parent who cares deeply for us. Contrast the reluctant friend with God's eagerness to listen and respond to His children.

3. Provision

Explore the idea that prayer is not just about receiving answers but also about the spiritual provision and growth that comes from regular communion with God. Encourage reflection on how prayer shapes our desires to align with God's will.

Practical Application for the Week Ahead

The passage from Luke 11:5-13 offers valuable takeaways and practical applications for Christians today. Pick ONE (at MOST two) and emphasise this point so that people can take hold of it and apply it in the week ahead.

- *Prayer as a Relationship*

Prayer is not merely asking for things but cultivating a relationship with God. Engage in prayer during the week to deepen our relationship with God and align our desires with His.

- *Persistence in Prayer*

We are encouraged to be steadfast and persistent in our prayers and not to lose heart when answers seem delayed.

- *Assurance in Prayer*

The passage assures believers that God hears our prayers and will respond with what is best for us. Be assured that our prayers are not in vain; God is attentive and responsive.

- *God's goodness*

God's responses to our prayers are what is ultimately good for us. Trust that God's answers to your prayers, even when unexpected, are for your spiritual growth and benefit.

These takeaways remind our congregations to view prayer as an essential, dynamic part of our faith, characterised by persistence, trust, and a deep relationship with a loving God.

Finish by summarising how prayer, as depicted in Luke 11:5-13, is an act of faith, a testament to our relationship with God, and a means to spiritual sustenance. Encourage the congregation to embrace prayer as a vital part of their daily lives, trusting in God's good and perfect gifts.

This outline aims to guide the congregation toward a deeper understanding of prayer beyond requests—as a persistent, intimate, and soul-nourishing dialogue with God.



Suggested Hymns

STF	H&P	
517	436	Father, hear the prayer we offer
455	63	All my hope in God is founded
526	552	Lord of all hopefulness
467	524	I need thee every hour
529	557	Prayer is the soul's sincere delay
519	436	Father, I place into your hands
531	559	What a friend we have in Jesus
471		Lord, I come to You
495	673	Dear Lord and Father of mankind
504	739	May the mind of Christ my Saviour

Call to Worship (based on Psalm 95)

O come, let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!
For we are God's people, the sheep of His pasture.

**For the Lord is good;
His steadfast love endures forever,**

As we gather in this sacred space,
let us lift our voices in praise and adoration,
for we are called to worship the One who reigns supreme.

**For the Lord is good;
His steadfast love endures forever,**

Let every heart be filled with gratitude,
every tongue with praise,
as we enter into the presence of our Creator.

**For the Lord is good;
His steadfast love endures forever,**

Prayers of Approach

Gracious God,
we come before You with humble hearts,
acknowledging our struggles with prayer.
We confess that often, our faith wavers,
our attention drifts,
and our devotion becomes sporadic.
In Your mercy, forgive us for the times
we have allowed the world's noise to drown out Your voice,
the moments we have grown weary in our petitions,
and our faltering trust in Your providence.

Amen

Teach us, O Lord,
to pray with the widow's perseverance,
the tax collector's boldness,
and the centurion's faith.
Help us understand that prayer is not just a request
but a dialogue with You, our Creator and Sustainer.
May we find renewed strength in Your presence
and be lifted by the assurance
that You are always listening, caring, and loving.

Amen

Guide us to pray not only with words
but with our lives,
reflecting Your grace and compassion
in all that we do.
In our moments of doubt,
remind us of Your promises and faithfulness.
Let our prayers be a testament to our confidence in You,
our rock and our redeemer.

Amen

Penitence

Leader When our hearts stray from Your path,
 Forgive our lack of enthusiasm in prayer,

All Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

Leader For the times we have neglected prayer,
 Choosing instead the clamour of the world,

All Christ, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.

Leader In our pride and self-reliance,
 When we forget our need for You,

All Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

Leader By the power of Your boundless love,
 Wash away our failures and shortcomings,
 Renew our spirits, O God,
 And lead us into paths of righteousness.
 Through Christ our Lord,
 Who reigns with You and the Holy Spirit,
 One God, now and forever.

All **Amen.**

Collect

Loving God,
who encourages us to come to You with our persistent prayers;
Help us always remember to reach out with confidence,
to trust in Your endless goodness,
and to prioritise Your will in our lives;
through Jesus Christ, our friend,
who is with You and the Holy Spirit,
one God, forever and ever.

Amen.

Intercessions

Heavenly Father, who invites us into the sacred space of prayer, ignite within us a burning desire to seek Your face. In the quiet moments of our days and the stillness of our nights, may we be drawn to You with a yearning that surpasses all earthly distractions. Help us to prioritise this divine meeting, where we lay bare our souls and find comfort in Your presence. May our desire to communicate with You become as natural as breathing and just as vital to our spiritual well-being.

Let us seek God's presence.

Lord, hear our prayer.

Lord of Wisdom, as we embark on the journey of prayer, we seek Your guidance to navigate our thoughts and emotions. Teach us to articulate the joys and sorrows that reside within us and to find the words that resonate with the frequency of heaven. Instruct our hearts that our prayers may rise as incense, pleasing and acceptable in Your sight. May we learn to listen as much as we speak, discovering Your voice amidst the clamour of life.

Let us seek God's presence.

Lord, hear our prayer.

God of Endurance, in a world that prizes instant results, instil in us the virtue of perseverance in our prayer life. When the heavens seem silent, grant us the strength to press on, trusting that You are working in the unseen. May our prayers be like seeds planted in faith, watered by our tears and warmed by the hope of Your unfailing love. Let us not grow weary in doing good, for in due season, we shall reap if we do not give up.

Let us seek God's presence.

Lord, hear our prayer.

Loving God, we acknowledge that trust is the cornerstone of prayer. As we lay our requests at Your feet, help us to release our grip on the outcomes, embracing the peace that comes from surrendering to Your will. May our prayers be filled with faith, not formulas; may they be conversations, not transactions. Teach us to trust in Your goodness and power to orchestrate our lives, even when the melody is unfamiliar.

Let us seek God's presence.

Lord, hear our prayer.

Holy God, let our commitment to prayer be the fertile ground on which our spirits grow and flourish. May we be transformed from the inside out through the discipline of daily communion with You. As we seek Your face, let us also seek Your heart, becoming more attuned to the things that move You. May our prayers be the catalyst for change in us, moulding us into vessels fit for Your use, equipped to serve and to love as Christ did.

Let us seek God's presence.

Lord, hear our prayer.

Sending Prayer (Benediction)

May the Lord bless you and keep you
as you journey to become a people of prayer.

May His Spirit guide you into deeper communion with Him,
and may your hearts be attuned to the rhythms of His grace.
As you seek His face in prayer in the week ahead
may you find strength, comfort, and wisdom.

Go now in peace to love and serve the Lord.

May the joy of prayer be with you,
transforming your days and deeds.

In the name of the Father,
the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.



Prayer Activity: Art Meditation

"*Christ of Saint John of the Cross*" by Salvador Dalí is a striking and unique depiction of the crucifixion. It can profoundly inspire contemplation and deepen our understanding of prayer.

Obtain a high-quality version of this iconic painting from the Internet. Reproduce it as you are able—either projected onto a screen or printed on sheets of paper and given out.

Here is a detailed script to guide the congregation or group in reflecting on this image and exploring its significance in the context of prayer.

"Take a moment to gaze upon 'Christ of Saint John of the Cross' by Salvador Dalí. Unlike traditional depictions of the crucifixion, this artwork presents a powerful perspective that invites us into a deeper reflection on the nature of prayer and sacrifice.

In this painting, Dalí was inspired by a sketch made by Saint John of the Cross, a mystic and poet. The crucifixion is viewed from above, a perspective that gives us a sense of hovering in the space between heaven and earth. This unconventional angle draws us into a profound contemplation of Christ's sacrifice and the divine mystery of the crucifixion.

Notice how Christ's body is suspended in a vast, dark sky, illuminated by an otherworldly light. The darkness surrounding Him highlights His isolation and the gravity of this moment. Beneath the cross, we see a calm, reflective sea and a boat, symbolising humanity's journey and the tranquillity of Christ's sacrifice.

Reflect on the positioning of Christ in this painting. His face is serene, devoid of pain, suggesting not just the physical suffering of the crucifixion but a deep, spiritual surrender and trust in God's will. This depiction invites us to see beyond the immediate suffering to His sacrifice's larger, redemptive purpose.

As you contemplate this image, think about how prayer is a form of surrender, much like Christ's ultimate act of giving Himself for the salvation of humanity. Prayer is not merely about asking or receiving but about aligning ourselves with God's will, just as Christ did.

Consider the vastness of the sky and the expanse of the water beneath. It symbolises the infinite nature of God's love and grace, which we tap into through prayer. In what ways does this image inspire you to approach prayer with a sense of awe and openness to God's vast and encompassing love?

Take a moment of silence to meditate on your personal experiences of prayer and how they connect you to the divine mystery and sacrifice depicted in this image. Reflect on how you can deepen your prayer life by embracing a perspective of surrender and trust, much like Christ on the cross."

Prayer Activity: Prayer Walking

Take a walk in nature or around your neighbourhood, using the time to pray silently as you observe and reflect on your surroundings.

- Choose a route for your walk, whether in nature, around your neighbourhood, in a local park, or some of the beautiful countryside in the Cleveland and Danby area.
- Begin your walk with a prayer, asking for guidance and presence throughout your journey.
- As you walk, observe the beauty of your surroundings and reflect on the presence and activity of God in nature.
- Offer prayers of gratitude, praise, or petition silently—or aloud, if you feel comfortable—as you feel led.
- Take time to pause and listen for any insights or messages that may come during your walk.

Ice Breaker Questions

If you had to describe your prayer life using a type of weather, what would it be and why?

or

What is the first thing that comes into your head when you hear the word "prayer"?

Questions you can use

- What does Jesus' parable about the friend at midnight (Luke 11.5-13) teach us about persistence in prayer?
- How do you typically respond when your prayers aren't answered immediately? How can this parable challenge or encourage you in those moments?
- Jesus emphasises persistence by saying, *"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."* What do these actions (ask, seek, knock) represent in your spiritual life?
- In verses 11-13, Jesus compares human fathers to our Heavenly Father. How does this comparison help you understand God's nature and how He responds to our needs?
- What does it look like to pray with boldness in your daily life?
- How can we invite the Holy Spirit to guide us in our prayer lives?
- Are there areas in your life where you feel hesitant to approach God? How can you overcome this hesitation?
- What doubts or fears do you have regarding prayer and God's response to your prayers? How can this passage help you address those doubts?
- How can this group support each other in overcoming doubts about prayer?

Multiple Choice Bible Study

On the next page is a bible study resource which you can copy and hand to your group. The point of these multiple choice bible studies isn't to "find the correct answer" There will usually be several "right" answers, and also answers which will be grey areas depending on people's interpretations. The purpose is to stimulate discussion.

So hand out the studies (with pens!) let the group circle their favourite answers, and have some fun with what might quite a lively discussion time!

1. What does the friend's response in the parable (verses 5-8) teach us about persistence in prayer?

- A. It suggests that persistence is annoying and should be avoided.
- B. It shows that persistence can lead to receiving what we need.
- C. It implies that we should only ask once and accept the outcome.
- D. It teaches that persistence is a sign of weakness.
- E. It tells us he liked his beauty sleep
- F. It indicates that God might be reluctant to help us.

2. How does the parable (verses 5-8) relate to the statement "Ask and it will be given to you" in verse 9?

- A. The parable shows that asking should be limited to significant needs.
- B. The parable shows that God wants us to have the begging bowl out
- C. The parable illustrates that asking persistently leads to receiving.
- D. The statement encourages boldness in asking for material possessions.
- E. The parable and the statement are unrelated and teach different lessons.
- F. The parable downplays the need for asking.

3. What does Jesus mean when He says, "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children" (verse 13)?

- A. Humans are inherently evil and cannot give anything good.
- B. Jesus is telling humans that they should give good gifts.
- C. It suggests that God's gifts are unpredictable and arbitrary.
- D. Even flawed humans know how to give good gifts, so just think how much a loving God wants to bless us.
- E. It implies that good gifts are only given to those who are good.
- F. It tells us that God is beyond our understanding

4. What can we infer about the nature of God's gifts from the examples of a fish and a snake, an egg and a scorpion (verses 11-12)?

- A. God might give us something harmful if we ask for the wrong thing.
- B. These examples suggest that God's gifts can sometimes be surprising.
- C. God always gives what is beneficial and never harmful.
- D. God wants us to eat less meat and more fish!
- E. The examples imply that we must be careful what we wish for!
- F. The gifts illustrate that God likes scorpions and snakes!